

Washington

MERRY-GO-ROUND

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WASHINGTON — Nine years ago, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., spiritual leader of the civil rights movement, was gunned down in Memphis. An escaped convict named James Earl Ray was nailed for the murder.

Yet nagging suspicions persisted that he may have been hired by others. The public doubt finally forced a Justice Dept. task force to review the case. It has now concluded that Ray "was the assassin and that he acted alone."

House investigators, however, have challenged the Justice Dept.'s findings. In a confidential, 16-page analysis, they have pointed out significant inconsistencies and omissions in the task force report.

They note that the task force had a "multitude of leads" to pursue, yet interviewed only 30 people. "Thirty interviews could hardly scratch the surface," declares the analysis. "A detective investigating a common street crime may very likely conduct more interviews."

The House investigators don't pretend that they have solved the case. But they have set forth their clues in a fascinating secret report, stamped "Sensitive."

Here are the highlights, in chronological order:

— While Ray was serving time in the Missouri state penitentiary, he told cellmates that he would kill King "if the price was right." Ray also was quoted as saying he intended to seek out a "businessmen's association" which allegedly had offered \$100,000 for King's murder.

— On April 23, 1967, Ray escaped from the prison by hiding in a large bread box, which was loaded on a bakery truck. The congressional investigators are trying to find out "whether anyone aided Ray in his escape and whether this assistance was connected" to the King assassination.

— Ray opened a safety deposit box in a Birmingham bank in August, 1967, and closed it four months later. Bank records show the box was closed by someone living in Baton Rouge, La. Yet Ray was living in Los Angeles at the time. The committee, therefore, is investigating "who in Baton Rouge aided Ray by closing that safety deposit box."

— The committee has received unverified reports that Ray was in touch with the Beverly Hills office of Litton Industries in California. While he was posing as Eric Galt, he also "even had scars in the same location as did Ray, the forehead and right palm." The House sleuths want to know "whether Ray received any help in obtaining these aliases."

— For the next year, Ray traveled across the United States, lived in more than a dozen cities and traveled in four foreign countries ... A conservative estimate of his total expense would be at least \$7,000. Ray himself estimates that he spent at least \$9,500. Those who did business with him recall that "he often paid for items with new \$20 bills." The House Assassinations Committee "intends to investigate sources of Ray's funds in general and of those \$20 billions in particular."

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House panel investigating new leads in King murder

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— The late William Sartor, a journalist, alleged that organized crime figures had accepted a \$300,000 contract on King's life from a right-wing racist group. According to Sartor, Ray got in touch with these men in New Orleans. The committee is seeking "all evidentiary materials that might support or refute Mr. Sartor's report."

— A witness has told investigators that he overheard a telephone conversation on the afternoon of the King assassination. "Frank Liberto, a person will alleged organized crime connections, said: 'Shoot the bastard. Do it this afternoon. Shoot him, even if you have to do it on the balcony, just do it.'"

— The committee has received "independent corroborations" of a possible Liberto link. A witness told of a Birmingham, Ala., gun shop owner who, before the assassination, pointed to a rifle and said: "This is the gun that is going to kill Martin Luther King." Later the witness saw the gun shop owner "in the company of Ray and Liberto." The secret report describes Liberto as "a target of the committee's investigation."

— The Memphis police set up a surveillance post in a firehouse overlooking the motel where King spent his last fatal hours. Curiously, two black firemen, Norwell Wallace and Floyd Newsom, were withdrawn from the post. Then a black policeman, Edward Redditt, was called off the surveillance. The committee "has begun to investigate these incidents."

— Ray fled to Toronto after the assassination. He applied for Canadian birth certificates under the names of Paul Bridgeman and Ramon George Sneyd. He finally obtained a birth certificate and passport in Sneyd's name. The House investigators are checking "the procedures used by Ray in securing these documents." They want to know whether he could have obtained them "without the assistance of some presently unidentified person or persons."

— The investigators are also chasing down a number of other leads. They are undeterred by the cold water that the Justice Dept. tried to throw on their investigation. It was the Justice Dept. they point out, "that supervised the initial investigation. The review was substantially a study of the existing paperwork and not a reinvestigation."

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